

Why “Guardians”?

By Sue Rahr

In 2012, when I accepted the responsibility for training all new local police recruits in Washington State, I drew on my 33 years of experience in the King County Sheriff’s Office. Starting as a patrol deputy in 1979 I worked my way up through the ranks and finished the last 7 years as the elected Sheriff. My goal as the Director of the Academy has been to instill in our recruits a deep sense of pride in the honor and nobility of policing and understand the proper role of policing in a democracy. Research and experience shows that officers who believe they serve a higher purpose will exercise a higher level of self-control, behave more honorably, and experience increased job satisfaction. While these are important attributes for building public trust, they also represent good business because honorable behavior leads to fewer lawsuits, and improved job satisfaction reduces turnover.

To achieve this goal I set out to establish a training environment in line with the mission of policing in a democracy. Before 2012 the symbols, training model, and philosophy were heavily stilted toward preparing soldiers for war. The training structure was modeled after a popular culture view of “boot camp” and the most pervasive themes reflected a “warrior mindset,” with a singular focus on winning battles and survival. While it is critically important to teach officers the skills of a warrior and mental toughness, it is equally important to instill appreciation for the balance between safety and liberty and distinguish the mission of protecting from the mission of conquering.

We adopted the term, “guardian” from the writings of Plato because it is a better reflection of the broad range of an officer’s role – a role that requires not only the skills of a warrior, but also the skills of a diplomat, counselor, and protector. Training at the academy today still contains the same high standards and number of hours on the firing range and the gym learning defensive tactics. But those hours are expanded to include strategies for de-escalation, communication, crisis intervention, and critical thinking. Recruits learn to expand their range of “tools” beyond weapons and force to resolve conflict and use strategies beyond arrest and incarceration to solve crime and disorder.

We are also promoting a program called “Blue Courage” for law enforcement leaders across the state so the key themes around honor and nobility that have been incorporated into the basic academy will be reinforced when officers return to their individual agencies.

Blue Courage program helps officers:

- Address cynicism, relationship, identity, integrity, health and stress.
- Enhance mental toughness, allowing for the essential resilience officers and leaders must have
- Rekindle the sense of and commitment to the purpose and nobility of policing.
- Maintain a culture of learning, critical thinking, open-mindedness, tolerance, and healthy curiosity
- Strengthen their moral compass and maintain the requisite courage to do the right thing in any circumstance.